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Community and Physical Culture

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Submission for *Physical Cultural Studies Handbook*

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Introduction

As physical cultural studies is primarily focused on the practices and experiences of the (in)active body, we suggest that there exists within Physical Cultural Studies (henceforth, PCS) an inherent concern for 'community.' As both an academic keyword and a concept and term readily used within everyday experience, community often connotes a multiplicity of meanings that are at once commonly understood and yet remain relatively opaque. While daily life may be characterized by discourses of community, the term is increasingly used in reference to vastly different groups of people and places in regards to scale, size, levels of social cohesion, and political identification. Whether a specific collection of homes and the families that live in them (e.g. a residential 'community'), or a broad understanding of political unity based in part on ideas about gender and sexuality (e.g. the LGBTQ 'community'), the word itself has increasingly been invested with multiple definitions and intentions, including in regards to sport, recreation, leisure and other forms of bodily movements and practices.

In our view, this seemingly (physical) cultural ubiquity means that the importance of engaging with forms of community within the contextual specificities of the contemporary moment must not be underestimated or undervalued, as these concerns are critical to how PCS might respond to social inequalities and contribute to dialogues about the communities in which we work and live. In this chapter, we derive our understanding of community by tracing meanings of this concept across a variety of scholarly fields, first through conceptualizations of community as anchored to philosophy and sociology, and in particular in regards to spatial and social relations. Following this, we further contextualize community within the lineage of cultural studies, as well as literature relevant to human movement and the active body. Lastly, we offer some specific directions and possibilities that constitute a specific approach to thinking about and engaging with community within PCS. In seeking to develop this approach as a response to the different and diverse framings of community that often permeate our everyday lives, we understand this concept to be part and parcel of the social, economic and political conjunctures within which specific communal forms and experiences take shape.

I. Philosophies and Theories of Community

As a core concept in social and cultural theory, the idea of community often eludes clear and concise definition. At the same time, the concept is flexible to and for those seeking to use it, and that flexibility has meant the concept is often taken-for-granted, and adopted uncritically (Cohen, 1985; Collins, 2010). Conceptually, community can be taken to include a range of scales, such as those in a neighborhood, city, nation, or global 'community'; it can also be mobilized to reference and explain associations amongst groups of people, such as those of a particular ethnic grouping, religion, nation, gender, sexuality, and so forth. As a starting place, we assert that community be understood in regards to spatial and cultural dimensions - that is, community is an idea that references groups of people living within specific areas and time frames, and whom share a sense of belonging and meaning derived from shared social experiences.

As a philosophical and sociological concept, community is often initially associated with the work of Ferdinand Tönnies. In *Community and Civil Society* (2001), first published in 1887 as *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, Tönnies outlined two concepts representative of social life or human associations: Gemeinschaft (community) and Gesellschaft (civil society). Gemeinschaft refers to those kinds of associations amongst and between human beings that can be characterized as small-scale and based on kinship, or the more “real and organic life” wherein individuals act toward or with one another on the basis of historical and collective interest (Tönnies 2001, p. 33). In contrast, Gesellschaft refers to those kinds of associations that are based in larger-scale and competitive, market-driven societies, wherein individuals act toward one another on the basis of competitive personal interest.

Tönnies focused on examining constructions of selfhood within the ever-present struggle between these two types of sociality. Focusing on the struggle between communal and civil society, his concepts remain important commentaries on modernity today and the effects of modernization resulting in the erosion of Gemeinschaft by Gesellschaft. Putnam (2001) illustrated the tension between Tönnies’s ideal types within modern American society, arguing that the United States populace experienced lower membership in civic organizations in the final two thirds of the 20th century (1995; 2001). Although he explores a range of civic-minded organizations, Putnam (2001) uses the physical cultural practice of bowling as a broader metaphor for civil decline – the title *Bowling Alone* references the concurrent increase in number of bowlers in the US and decrease in community-based bowling leagues.

In his dedicated examination of religion, Durkheim (1965) suggested that religion was constructed and constituted not only through belief but also several kinds of beliefs and practices in relation to those things sacred (i.e. a church or ritual). Together, beliefs and practices integrate into a more unified system than one would be without the other. Around these sets of beliefs and related practices communities take shape, and for Durkheim these were morally based. In this sense, “collective representations” are ways in which individuals and groups commonly shared amongst one another through institutions or experiences express and derive a sense of we-ness. Community, then, is comprised of and derived from those representations and experiences.

Another important conceptualization of community introduces more substantively the language of imagination and the expressions of collective belonging and identity. Anderson (1983) framed the nation as an “imagined political community” (p. 6):

imagined because members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.

Thinking through the relationship between the nation state, nationalism, and national identity, Anderson considered the nation an ‘imagined’ community because “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (p. 7). However, Anderson emphasizes that all communities, of all relative scales and sizes, are imagined in so far as they bring together individuals based on perceptions and

feelings of a greater sense of collectivity, explaining that “all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even then) are imagined” (p. 6). This conceptualization therefore asserts the socially constructed and experienced bonds which often characterize forms of community, through those moments that bring about a sense of connection with other individuals.

Another extension on the idea of community is found in Victor Turner’s (1969) sense of ‘communitas’. Ingham and McDonald (2003) explain communitas as a special experience during which individuals are able to rise above those structures that materially and normatively regulate their daily lives and that unite people across the boundaries of structure, rank, and socioeconomic status (p. 26).

Ingham and McDonald (2003) agreed with Turner’s assertion that the conditions out of which communitas could emerge on a more permanent basis are difficult to locate or create, and that community and communitas are objects and sites of ideological work. Acknowledging Turner’s contributions, they importantly break from Turner by linking together the structural and the ideological, rather than maintaining some level of exclusivity between the two.

Importantly, these conceptualizations of communitas bring temporal specificity to the fore in discussions of community. Communitas in this sense responds in part to the turmoil of modernity (Weber, 1978; Cooley, 1967), the modern and industrial city and world, and the post-modern and post-industrial city and world. Whereas community previously suggested a stronger relationship between people and places across time, communitas acknowledges the post-war context through emergent and more impermanent ideas of community. As such, ‘community’ was decreasingly conceived as located only in specific places with fixed physical or spatial and temporal boundaries. Instead, shifting demographic patterns, population migration within and across countries, civil rights and feminist movements, and urban reformations all worked to unhinge prior ideas about community in relation to time and space.

II. Community and Cultural Studies – Definitions and Interpretations

A focus on the practices, experiences, and representations of different forms of community has also been evident in the lineage of cultural studies, extending back to the development of Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham in the 1960s. This research looked to focus on how and why individuals interacted with particular elements of culture, including the formation of social groups based in and on cultural signs, symbols, meanings and practices. As evidence of the importance of conceptualizing community within social and cultural research, the term was included as one of Raymond Williams’ ‘keywords’ for cultural studies, defined as “a warmly persuasive word [used] to describe an existing set of relationships” (1976, p. 76). The initial incorporation of community into cultural studies therefore centered on engaging with forms of ‘togetherness’ that were characterized by particular social dynamics, and expressed through particular actions and experiences that demonstrated the dialectic relations between culture and society.

Specifically, the work of two scholars from the lineage of cultural studies reflect how issues and ideas of community were integral, if not often implicit, to the development of the field - one involved in the formation of the CCCS and British Cultural Studies in the early 1960s, and the other in the expansion and popularization of cultural studies in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The former, Richard Hoggart, helped to establish cultural studies in Britain through his own research and social commentary regarding the dynamics of English working-class families in the post-war era. In this mode, Hoggart (1957) focused on analyzing and describing how traditional working-class forms of culture and community were changing in the face of popular cultural imports from abroad.

As cultural studies continued to develop over the next several decades, ongoing discussions regarding the dynamics and representations of social groupings resulted in different theories linking culture and community. However, as Gelder (2007) notes, these theorizations were framed by previous work in cultural studies – including that of Hoggart and Williams, as well as E.P. Thompson – which shaped any understanding of community within the field:

“First, their focus was on the English working class, understood as a community bound to a neighbourhood and tied together by family. Second, these prehistories...established a ‘them’ and ‘us’ binary with varying degrees of dissent, as well as a programme for writing ‘history from below’. Third, the emphasis was cultural: on rituals, traditions and practices, and the meanings they conveyed. Fourth, contemporary life, defined through mass communication, mass cultural forms, entertainment and consumerism was seen as a threat to all this and therefore viewed negatively” (p. 87).

These ideas therefore often characterized an understanding of community within cultural studies as both an integral aspect of lived experience, as well as a particular form of working class identity that should be preserved and celebrated, especially against the rising tide of commercialism and consumerism.

In the late 1970s, this view of community was articulated through the work of Dick Hebdige, which specifically focused on the notion of ‘subculture’ as a particular formation or interpretation of intra-personal interaction and identification. According to Hebdige (1979), by this period more traditional forms of community were giving way to emergent forms of social togetherness, based on different aspects of daily life. In lieu of ties founded on family and neighborhood, an increasing number of youth expressed forms of communal relationships formed through culturally-specific spaces and symbols. As his primary case in point, Hebdige identifies the “moment of punk” as an example of subcultural practices and expressions, including the symbolism and aesthetics of punk as both musical form and as a source of shared identity (p. 19). Following this work, the concept of ‘subculture’ within cultural studies was recognized as a form of social togetherness that was both related to and yet essentially different from the notion of community. On the one hand, both subcultures and communities were understood to be made up of shared cultural practices and experiences, but within this framework subcultures were also in part the result of an erosion, displacement and nullification of ‘traditional’ working class forms of community.

Within the context of the 1980s and 1990s, the changing dynamics of the field of cultural studies were made evident via increased concerns for aspects of social identity beyond social class, including race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality (see Grossberg, Nelson & Treichler (Eds.) 1992). This also meant that the previous understandings of 'community' as a disappearing form of working class relations were problematized, as notions of social togetherness were recognized as not necessarily rooted within class position and status. Following McRobbie (1978, 1991), cultural studies increasingly acknowledged the potential limits of prioritizing class analysis over other axes of social difference, and in particular worked to incorporate forms of critical feminism within cultural research.

Similarly, Hall (1993) sought to discuss ideas of community in regards to national identity, race and ethnicity, and re-define the term in comparison to the conceptualization of community put forth by earlier cultural studies scholars. Taking on Williams' notion of community as based primarily in particular forms of race, ethnicity, national identity and social class, as evinced by the primary focus on English white working class cultures, Hall (1993) asserts that this understanding is inherently limited in its ability to apprehend and analyze multiple types and kinds of 'community' that are a part of lived experience:

"the emphasis on 'actual and sustained social relationships' as the principal basis of identification and cultural 'belongingness' presents many difficulties which take us back to that original stress, in Williams's work, on culture and community as a 'whole way of life'. Whose *way*? Which *life*? One way or several? Isn't it the case that, in the modern world, the more we examine 'whole ways of life' the more internally diversified, the more cut through by complex patterns of similarity and difference, they appear to be?" (p. 359, original emphasis).

These definitions and debates regarding community have continued in both cultural studies and related fields, including within research focused on the practices and experiences of the active body. While different authors have engaged with the idea of community in regards to diverse topics and issues, there have been two primary uses or understandings of the term within the study of human movement – the first of these incorporates 'community' to denote a form of social togetherness, evoking the Tonniesian and sociological definition to describe how physical movement can be involved in the development of social ties and cultural linkages between individuals. In her work focusing on female ice hockey players, Theberge (1995) utilizes this conception of community as social togetherness in exploring how gender and sport are interconnected within these athlete's experiences. Noting that "women athletes face the challenge of constructing a community within a broader social context marked by ambivalence toward their endeavors," Theberge explains how both a commitment and identity related to the sport, as well as specific dynamics of gender and sexuality, are evident in the "construction of community" (p. 390).

American football has been one physical culture at the focus of discussions of community. As demonstrated by Foley's (1990) research in a small town in Texas, for the nearly 8,000 residents of North Town the rituals of high school football "enlivened the community's social life... Community sports was the patriotic,

neighborly thing to do” (Foley 1990, p. 113). Yet at the same time, football often “socializes people into community structures of inequality” (p. 112). While these various rituals affirmed a collective solidarity, they also became the source of division through existing social hierarchies.

These discussions of community in relation to physical cultures have therefore both reflected an understanding of shared practices and identities, while also placing the concept within theoretical dialogue. In particular, Helstein (2005) argues that community, “as normatively representative of solidarity and unification, is understood to be productive”, in that most often our ideas of community are centered on the ways in which individuals come together to form a group identity that provides the opportunity to “share in mutual identification and to pursue mutual rights” (p. 2). However, while community represents a “powerful construct” for both feminists and for female athletes, Helstein cites the Derridean concern for recognizing both the threat and promise of community as a form of social and political ‘consensus’ - instead, her analysis focuses on how community might work as a post-structural concept that will “open up” to different theories and uses (p. 2).

More recently, developments in technology and forms of social media have once again suggested the re-defining of community within contemporary forms of sport and physical activity (Olive, 2015; Thorpe, 2014; Wilson & Hayhurst, 2009). While the approach to studying physical cultural communities offered here is primarily focused on non-digital contexts, the overlying understanding of community as open to different interpretations and definitions signals a clear re-constitution of the term away from its uses within sociology and earlier British cultural studies, and no longer attached to a particular historical moment or population. Instead, studies of physical culture have increasingly sought to explore how specifically different forms of contextually-bound communal experience are characterized by particular cultural practices and expressions. To reiterate, we suggest that community within these works is discussed as an idea that references groups of people living within specific spatial and temporal contexts, and whom share a sense of identity, belonging and meaning derived from common interests and practices.

III. Community and Physical Cultural Studies

As evidenced by the preceding sections, future research concerning ideas of community in relation to the active body will have a number of philosophical, sociological and theoretical understandings from which to draw from and engage with, including previous work focused specifically on sport and physical activity. However, in the remaining space we branch off from these valuable contributions in order to offer a flexible and yet principled approach to thinking about and studying the myriad forms, practices and experiences of community that are related to physical culture and PCS.

In particular, this approach follows the theoretical formation of PCS as put forth by Ingham (1997) and Silk & Andrews (2011), as the position that we outline below is necessarily predicated on several guiding ideas about the nature of physical cultural research. In particular, while our approach is characterized by specific

theories and methods, we would argue for an intellectual openness that means when thinking about physical cultures and community, “no epistemology should be privileged” – and we would add ontology and methodology as well (Ingham 1997, p. 171). This indicates that there is no singular, established and defined way of understanding and engaging with forms of community, but rather an open dialogue about how and why different theories and methods are, or might be, valuable to both the specific research agenda at hand, as well as to the larger development of PCS. Further, while multiple theories and methods are seen as possibilities, our approach follows Silk & Andrews’ (2011) framework for a “radically contextual” PCS, in which “physical cultural forms...can only be understood by the way in which they are *articulated* into a set of complex social, economic, political and technological relationships that comprise a social context” (p. 9, original emphasis). In our view, this insistence on the inter-dependent nature of ideas of ‘community’ on the particular set of actors, spaces and forces involved means that any interpretation of communal experience and social togetherness must be developed in and through the acts of the researcher(s).

Given this context-specific understanding of social relations, rather than attempting to develop a singular and comprehensive theory of community within PCS, we would offer several guiding principles that can provide a basis for thinking about social cohesion and communal relationships in regards to physical culture and the active body. First, this includes Collins’ (2010) assertion of community as a political construct, in that it functions as a culturally ubiquitous concept and term, as well as a contested form of social and political interaction within contemporary global societies. In this view, “as the construct of community constitutes both a principle of actual social organization and an idea that people use to make sense of and shape their everyday lived realities, it may be central to the workings of intersecting power relations in heretofore unrecognized ways” (Collins 2010, p. 8). This ‘elastic’ conceptualization of community allows for “a variety of contradictory meanings around which diverse social practices and understandings occur” (Collins 2010, p. 10). The emphasis is therefore on the ways in which forms of community are always and only enacted through particular cultural practices and experiences, and lived through specific social relations.

Moreover, by implicating any focus on community within existing relations of power, this framework aims to deconstruct and decenter many of the academic and popular meanings that have been ascribed to this term, including those within sociology and cultural studies. That is, instead of applying ideas about community that come pre-loaded with a specific definition or reference to a particular social group, researchers within PCS would recognize that forms of community are always experienced in and through practices that are to be described and defined in relation to their own context. This approach can also help to avoid what Joseph (2002) refers to as the ‘romanticism’ that has characterized several cultural understandings of community, including those in previous formations of cultural studies, wherein the researcher posits the given culture and population being focused on as simultaneously threatened and inherently valuable. Instead, PCS can and should seek to examine how particular ‘communities’ are both constituted by and constitutive of different subjectivities and social identities that are always

embedded within specific configurations of power. Our approach thereby follows Helstein (2005) and others within the social study of human movement in recognizing the ways in which power always operates not only between a particular form of community and other forces and institutions, but also in and through the practices and experiences that make up any specific form of organized social relations.

These theoretical concerns often overlap with discussions about how researchers within PCS can methodologically engage with and study different community formations. At the core of a physical cultural method is *articulation*, or the active reconstructing of a context within and through which practices and *events*, or effects of power, and indeed communities, take shape (Grossberg, 1989; Hall, 1992; Andrews, 2002; Silk & Andrews, 2011). Working from an articulatory base, embracing a fluid yet critical adoption of the idea of community—from the organic communal to extended networks of *communitas*—as well as maintaining a sensitivity to Saukko's (2003; Silk & Andrews, 2011) three methodological currents/validities—contextual, dialogic, and self-reflexive—engaging with communities requires making use of the research bricolage (Kincheloe, 2001); that is, drawing upon a “diverse methodological arsenal” (Silk & Andrews, 2011, p. 17) that allows researchers to work across disciplines, with multiple methods of inquiry, and within the complexity of the research task. As such, PCS may be regarded as resistant to methodologies and more embracing of methods.

No singular method represents the best way in which to do research on communities. The only method worth having, to paraphrase Stewart Hall (1992) on theory, is that which you have to fight off, not that which you speak with profound fluency (p. 280). From interviewing, textual analysis, narrative analysis, and field methods (Markula & Silk, 2011), the practice and politics of the doing of research offers much in the way for qualitative, physical cultural researchers interested in studying communities. Decisions about which method(s) to make use of should be orchestrated not around rigid templates but rather oriented toward better understanding and negotiating the I-thou dialogue (Johnson, Chambers, Raghuram, & Tincknell, 2004). Community Based Practice Research (CBPR) and Participatory Action Research (PAR) represent more common and useful approaches for working with communities. As approaches, and not methods or methodologies, CBPR and PAR seek to maintain commitments that, like politically inspired PCS projects, address forms of collective, self-reflexive, and political-inspired research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; 2005; Levine-Rasky, In Press).

Instructively, Baker, Homan, Schonhoff, and Kreuter (1999) offer a useful distinction between three kinds of research on/with communities in terms of who drives and controls a project. The first understands the researcher as driving the inquiry. Control over the process of research—of shaping questions, approaches, and responses—rests in the hands of the researcher. In the second, community members might assist in some ways to shaping questions but are un-involved in the rest of the process. Control largely lies in the hands of the research, and participants remain marginal contributors and sources of data. The third, and more recent form, involves the researcher and participants collaboratively and jointly conceiving and carrying out the research. Approached in this sense, community based work does

not rely on a singular approach but rather highlights a way of *practicing* the research process. For a useful discussion and series of examples of these types within sport and physical activity, see Schinke, McGannon, and Smith's (2013) special issue in *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*.

In the last 15 to 20 years a few scholars have begun to take up the third type of community based research on sport and physical activity put forward by Baker et al (1999), most notably in the work of Wendy Frisby and Audrey Giles. Whilst these are not the only people to engage with community-based scholarship, they do represent advance scholarship consistent with a collectively inspired and politically based impetus. Frisby and colleagues, for example have worked with low-income women and issues of sport and recreation involvement (Frisby & Millar, 2002) as well as Chinese immigrant women and inclusion in physical activity across a range of peoples, organizations, and institutions (Frisby, 2011). Audrey Giles and colleagues focus primarily on health based research with aboriginal communities (e.g. Nicholls & Giles, 2007; Giles & Forsyth, 2007). What is compelling about the work of Wendy Frisby and Audrey Giles, and colleagues, is not just that they are mobilizing community based work, but they work also to better understand the process of research *with* communities, acknowledging and examining the difficulties and complexities of conducting and realizing research that integrates participants in every step of the research process (Frisby, Reid, Millar, & Hoeber, 2005), under-theorizing issues of power in participatory and community research (Golob & Giles, 2013), or colonization of indigenous methodologies (Giles & Darroch, 2014). Doing so, they have laid the groundwork for community based scholarship that, in paralleling Schinke, McGannon, and Smith (2013), seek not definitive notions of what constitutes community-based research or practice but rather seek a diversity of perspectives. Such an orientation searches for a productive dialogue amongst several aspects of the research process. These aspects include, amongst others: a diversity of the ways in which community is conceptualized and carried out; a range of theoretical and methodological approaches; and a critical approach, meaning identifying and working with relations of power.

To conclude, we would like to further support the approach to thinking about community that has been outlined here by re-asserting the importance and relative usefulness for the term and concept within PCS. In particular, this utility is based in two different ways in which we hope to characterize dialogues regarding community within the ongoing and future development of PCS.

In the first sense, this refers to the ways in which critical analyses of specific physical cultural forms, practices and experiences of community and *communitas* can be aligned with research goals of apprehending and addressing existing relations of social, economic and political power. Following Collins (2010), there are several aspects of studying community that therefore make the concept a "promising candidate" for engaging with myriad forms of social inequality. First, communities are manifest through actions by individuals in all social positions, and thus are experienced by both the 'elite' and 'everyday' – and the formation and experience of community is often characterized by "strong, deep feelings" that can resonate powerfully along and across lines of social difference and identity (p. 10). Further, the cultural pervasiveness of community as political construct means that it

functions as an integral aspect of how people “make sense of” social inequalities, and how social structures and institutions are organized and experienced (p. 12). These characteristics demonstrate how a critical theoretical and reflexive methodological approach can accentuate the ways in which forms of community involving active bodies—moving and/or consuming together—are always experienced in and through relations of power.

At the same time, the value and potential for this approach to community within PCS incorporates not only the study of existing social relations and shared practices and identities, but also the fostering and development of a PCS community of researchers that aims to engage various publics through scholarly work. This means that along with interrogating what is meant by community when the term is used by and applied to particular social groupings, we would argue for a continual dialogue regarding the ongoing development of critical perspectives on human movement as the “becoming of a community” in itself, by recognizing the various interests, aims and purposes that constitute PCS (Grossberg 1996, p. 88). In this sense, studying community and communities would therefore also involve establishing an ‘open-ended’ form of community that is enacted through the personal and professional lives of ‘practitioners’ of PCS, and within the interactions between researchers and a variety of places, people and institutions. Following from the approach to community that has been explicated within this chapter, this would allow for and encourage different interpretations, identifications and experiences as an integral aspect of PCS – therefore we might utilize the ‘elasticity’ of community towards developing and realizing forms of praxis that allow those involved in PCS to both critically examine and engage with the worlds in which we live.

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